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ABSTRACT

This document reports on a conference that addressed the involvement of the National Council of Churches of Christ/USA in literacy education in North America, at which literacy program participants, national leaders in literacy education, church leaders, and international literacy delegates described their successes and struggles. The first sections provide a definition of literacy and explain the purposes of the conference. The next section asks whether becoming literate amounts to getting bask to "basics" in education or whether it amounts to political and social liberation. The experience of the Lutheran Church with literacy is described as a case study. A discussion by a panel of national literacy education leaders is followed by description of the experience of eight literacy students and eight literacy programs. A summary of discussions held at the conference includes the church's motivation for work in literacy, what churches should do, the church as advocate, literacy as a two-way street, measuring the effectiveness of literacy programs, and the commitment of the United States to literacy. The responses of church leaders at the conference are provided. The recommendations from small group discussions are recounted in the next section, under the headings awareness, advocacy, and action. A prayer for literacy appears next. Appendices contain the conference program and information on conference participants and the conference design team. (CML)

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THE CHURCH'S INVOLVEMENT IN NORTH AMERICAN LITERACY

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September 14-16, 1987 Conference Report

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface ..... Page 2
A Definition of Literacy ..... Page 3
Introduction ..... Page 4
Wingspread ..... Page 4
General Sessions ..... Page 5-14
A. Literacy: Back to Basic or Liberation ..... Page 5
B. Case Study: Lutherans and Literacy ..... Page 6
C. National Literacy Efforts: A Panel Presentation ..... Page 6
D. The Literacy Students ..... Page 8
E. The Grassroots Program ..... Page 10
Discussion Summaries ..... Page 11
Church Leader Responses ..... Page 13
Recommendations from Small Group Discussions ..... Page 14
A Prayer for Literacy ..... Page 15
Appendix A: Conference Program ..... Page 15
Appendix B: List of Participants ..... Page 16

PREFACE

North American Churches have historically ministered to the literacy and basic education needs of adults in other parts of the world. Now that the extent of illiteracy in North America has been revealed, churches are turning their attention to the problem at home.

In response to many inquiries about the Church's participation in literacy, the National Council of Churches of Christ/USA designed and sponsored a conference to address the Church's involvement in North American literacy. Invited participants included literacy program participant teams, national literacy leaders, church leaders and international literacy delegates.

Literacy program students and teachers spent three days describing their successes and struggles, enabling the church leaders to more fully understand the scope and complexity of literacy work. It was the task of church leaders to listen and to learn.

This report attempts to convey the soul and the essence of the conference. It reveals the efforts of people to understand each other as well as the important issues that all were raising. Though strong differences of opinion and understanding, methodology and theology were at times expressed, there was also a dynamic sense of community and consensus.

A DEFINITION OF LITERACY

Literacy is ONE way to help people become self-determining and responsible members of their communities. Literacy can help people be all God intended them to be because literacy provides many basic skills needed to study and understand their real-life situations.

Reading and writing and math are central to literacy, but so are some other skills. The ability to see connections, to imagine different ways of doing things and different ways of living, the ability to tell of one's life in song or dance or story —this is part of becoming literate.

Literacy is to be understood within the given social, economic, political and psychological conditions in which one lives. What literacy is for one society is not literacy for another. Literacy needs to be measured and judged according to the needs of each society. Literacy needs are often different even from one community to another.

Literacy is a collective, ongoing process. It needs to have its roots in the actual situations and needs of people. Literacy needs to be based on individual needs, but also on the needs of the group of which the individual is a part. Literacy IS a process by which women and men can learn to organize themselves and to help to change the things and conditions which hinder their lives and quality of life. Literacy is revolutionary when it starts with the learner's goal. That is, literacy can set people free from all kinds of oppression. Literacy brings power as well as understanding.

Literacy is a tool for education which is:

many-sided and of many kinds;
to be shared with others (not stored);
a means for gaining decision-making control over one's life;
a means for gaining decision-making power in one's community;
shaped by history and society,
but also by personal experiences and cultures;
achieved only in a just society and
which helps to bring about a just society;
strong enough to act upon forces blocking other life goals;

Literacy has to do with language—language decided by those who use it and not controlled by those in power. Literacy is creating new answers to old questions. Literacy is creating new questions which are based on how things really are. Creative literacy is learning how to learn.

Literacy has to do with promoting every person's right to learn and to have access to information. Literacy helps people to develop analytical and decision-making skills. Literacy helps people "own" information in whatever form it is carried. Literacy carries with it an obligation to advocate the same rights for others — all others.

—Design Team for "The Church's Involvement in North American Literacy."

INTRODUCTION

As the extent of illiteracy in North America is revealed, churches are being challenged to turn their attention from literacy problems abroad to literacy problems at home.

So it's time for the churches to accept literacy as a priority concern and get involved, according to the planners of the National Council of Churches' conference on "The Church's Involvement in North American Literacy," held in Racine, Wisconsin, September 14-16, 1987.

To help the churches figure out where to begin, the conference provided the first opportunity for adult literacy students and teachers, representatives from national literacy programs and the U.S. Department of Education, and staff from U.S. church bodies to meet and discuss the issue together.

In her welcome to the 60 conference participants, Margaret Shafer, National Council of Churches Staff Associate for Education in the Society, said the churches "are mainly lacking clarity on what to do and how to do it." The conference, she said, was "to provide some guidance to the churches, to make possible some response and to reinforce the churches' commitment to this great and important work."

The role of the church leaders was to hear what is happening in communities across North America, and then join together to address two questions: What are the priorities being raised by the presenters. And how can and should churches respond to those issues? A recurring theme in the conference was that literacy and justice are inextricably linked. In fact, one conference goal was to provide increased understanding of the national literacy situation and some of the major issues it involves, including those issues blocking attempts of people to become literate.

The conference also had a "networking" side to it. It provided an opportunity for participants, many of whom have known about their colleagues' work in literacy for a long time, to meet each other, to share resources and to find solutions to problems they have in common.

WINGSPREAD

"The Church's Involvement in North American Literacy," which was funded by six denominations and the National Council of Churches, was co-sponsored by the Johnson Foundation. The conference was held at the foundation's Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin.

Wingspread was originally designed by Frank Lloyd Wright as the home of the Johnson family, of Johnson Wax fame. Elegant and secluded, the conference center is set on several acres of lovely grounds.

Conference participants received warm hospitality from Henry M. Halsted III, vice president of the Johnson Foundation, and his efficient staff throughout the conference.

LITERACY: BACK TO BASICS OR LIBERATION?

Is literacy getting back to basics or is literacy political and social liberation?

Whatever position participants at the National Council of Church's conference on "The Church's Involvement in North American Literacy" took on that question, they all seemed to agree that literacy means different things to different people and that literacy and justice are inextricably linked.

"Literacy is not simply teaching the skills of reading," Sally McBeth, coordinator of East End Literacy in Toronto, told the group at the opening session of the conference. "Students need vocabulary to express concerns, ideas, and options in their own lives," she said.

"Illiteracy is not an educational problem," Michael James of the Pacific Center for Literacy and Popular Education in San Francisco told the group, "more money is spent per capita on education in this country than any country in the world," he said.

The son of a Japanese mother and a Black father, James recalled his childhood in tenements in the Fillmore district of San Francisco. He said he received his mandate from his mother the day that Martin Luther King, Jr., was shot.

"I clearly recall the cold day when the image on the television screen displayed the shiny black casket on a horse-drawn wagon surrounded by a throng of familiar, even familial, mourners, when she said, 'This is who you are to be, this is what you are to do. You are to understand this all, and do something about changing this world.' I believe it was at this moment that I became literate."

He described being "given the power of the word" in the 1960's. "Suddenly," he said, "it seemed we had words and names with which to define ourselves and how we felt. Black. Asian. Anti-War. Free Speech. Peace."

"The illiteracy so often discussed," he said, "is not a problem — and generally not perceived as being anything more than a symptom of something much larger by those who are diagnosed as its 'carriers' — people of color, the poor, the working class."

"To diagnose illiteracy as the problem leads to the erroneous conclusion that literacy somehow solves a problem." Instead, James suggested, literacy must be part of a larger process of liberation for people who are disenfranchised.

Carlos Nolasco, who works with James, agreed, "Teaching people to read without teaching them to change their society isn't literacy, it's domestication," he said.

Many people are "illiterate about illiteracy," according to Mike Fox, of Washington, D.C., director of Push Literacy Action Now.

Addressing the popular approach of tutoring programs, Fox commented "Too many look at the solution in terms of changing the victim; not much has been said about changing the systems and the structures which perpetuate illiteracy."

Sister Lucy Comer of the Georgia Advance Literacy Council in Rhine, Georgia, cautioned the group to remember the "tremendous need for programs that are more comprehensive than just reading and writing."

The churches must "announce, pronounce, and denounce" illiteracy, Osmundo Ponce, a Guatemalan working with Alfalit International in Costa Rica, told the group. "They must lose their fear to find truth," he said.

With a large amount of national attention focused on the issue of literacy, several presenters voiced suspicion about its trendiness. "Who's interested in literacy and why?"

"Why is literacy important to the church?" asked Fox. "What is the crisis of literacy in the church?"

Nolasco followed up another speaker's reference to the national literacy awareness campaign slogan, "Why Can't Johnny Read?" by asking the group to consider "For what do you want Johnny to read?"

And James urged the group to consider "in whose interest does literacy exist?"

The motivation for church involvement generated debate between those who believe there should be a evangelistic emphasis in church literacy programs, and those who feel the church should avoid such an emphasis.

"There is a distinction between church literacy programs and community-based programs," said Lester Meriwether of Fort Worth, director of Southern Baptist Leadership Training Center of Texas. "The mandate of the church is to minister to the needs of the whole person. There ought to be a spiritual emphasis on literacy programs in the church."

The Southern Baptist Convention and the Lutheran Church in America are currently the only two United States denominations with national literacy programs.

Sister Lucy Comer told the group that in her experience, "the Bible is a coveted goal, people do want to read the Bible."

Cyrus Keller of St. Louis, editor-in-chief of religious literature for the African Methodist Episcopal Church, commented, "The question is not whether we help people to read the Bible, but which passages will they read?"

And during her presentation on "Lutherans and Literacy," Marti Lane, coordinator of Volunteer Reading Aides for the Lutheran Church in America, told the group that the reading aides program slogan is "If they can't read the words, they can't read the Word."

The relationship between new church struc-

tures created to deal with illiteracy and existing community programs was also considered by the group. Presenters at the meeting offered some strong words of caution for the church representatives as they consider action in the literacy movement.

McBeth urged participants not to get caught in an argument on how to teach reading, but to create a "literacy context where everyone has choices."

"Literacy is not an easy, quick thing to do," she advised the church leaders. "look for a community foundation already there and build on it."

Reminding the church representatives that literacy is currently an "in" issue, Nancy Oakley, director of Project Literacy in Cleveland, Ohio, told them "when our day in the sun is over, the literacy community has a right to expect that the church will still be with us."

Marti Lane
Volunteer Reading Aides Program, Lutheran Church Women

CASE STUDY: LUTHERANS AND LITERACY

Adding a new twist to an old Chinese proverb, Marti Lane, Coordinator of Volunteer Reading Aides for Lutheran Church Women, explained to conference participants an essential principle of the LCW literacy strategy.

"Give a man a fish, he can feed himself for a day.

Teach a man to fish, and he can feed himself and his family for a lifetime

...if he has access to the fish pond."

Lutherans have learned to understand literacy as a justice issue, she said.

Lutherans are a case study in effective church work on literacy. They have had a national commitment to literacy for a long time, she told the group, but until three years ago, all of the national work was done by LCW, the women's organization of the Lutheran Church in America.

Now, she said, the denomination has recognized illiteracy as a root cause of hunger and understands better how it is intertwined with other problems. The LCA has made literacy a "priority social concern," she said, and is now supporting the literacy program of LCW with funds from the World Hunger program, an ongoing appeal of the church.

"Literacy does not mean recruiting some students and tutors and patting them on the back," she cautioned, "Though that's part of it," she said, reminding the group that "literacy cannot be separated from its context."

The LCW Volunteer Reading Aides Program helps develop community-based literacy programs across North America, focusing on the needs and interests of the students in each community.

The name of the program was carefully chosen, Lane said, since the program relies on volunteer tutors to help students learn to read.

Lane told the group that the program has a religious base and that the LCW motto is "If they can't read the words, they can't read the Word."

The LCW programs provide people with religious instruction, she said, to make sure the Good News reaches everyone.

The LCW program has developed a range of no-frills reading materials on essential subjects, she said. It also publishes inexpensive, student-based materials, including stories of people's lives, and Bible studies for beginning readers.

The organization has taken a network approach to forming literacy programs. Each regional unit of LCW is encouraged to choose a literacy coordinator, who in turn does "whatever she can to stir up literacy," in that area.

The LCA's commitment to literacy will be continued into the new Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, formed in 1988.

NATIONAL LITERACY EFFORTS: A Panel Presentation

A panel of noted national literacy leaders from government, business and private organizations shared information on what is happening in their organizations.

In literacy, "it's important to remember that you don't just put in a few hours and miraculously change lives. You have to focus on keeping people in the programs," Karl Haigler, director of adult education for the U.S. Department of Education, told National Council of Churches' literacy conference participants.

Research shows that good literacy programs tend to be learner-centered and to use peer training, he told the group. Other hallmarks of good programs, he said, are regular assessment of stu-

dents, and programs that nurture a sense of mission and team spirit in participants. Haigler said the U.S. government has been taking the initiative to build national awareness on the issue of literacy and to promote awareness in the private sector.

The Department of Education provides more than $100 million in matching grants to state literacy programs, he told the group. Since 1983, when there were only two state literacy coalitions, he said, the number of state coalitions has grown to 36.

He urged conference participants to seek funds from the government, telling them that non-public groups are eligible for funding.

Haigler's office is also concerned with the concept of family literacy, he said. To teach literacy it is important to teach parents skills in developing children's reading.

The Business Council for Effective Literacy is neither a literacy program or a grant-making program, Dan Lacy, the council's vice president, explained to conference participants. Instead, the council works with business organizations to increase awareness of the problems of illiteracy. The business council was created in 1983 with a grant from Harold W. McGraw, Jr., of McGraw Hill Publishers.

The council suggests eight steps businesses can take to fight illiteracy. These include funding local literacy organizations and giving grants to national groups such as Laubach and Literacy Volunteers of America.

Businesses can also provide resources for new approaches to literacy, such as computers. Business leaders can become personally involved in the issue by working with local or state organizations, Lacy said. They can also fund research on new methods of literacy instruction, he said.

The council also recommends that business leaders assess the training needs of their own employees and see how they can work together to upgrade employees' skills.

"As we approach full employment," Lacy commented, "we dig deeper into the pool for who we need." Everyone needs basic skills. So the council is paying "emphatic attention" to workplace literacy, he said. Such efforts make employees more employable from their own point of view, he said, and make them more efficient.

Employers can also encourage employees to volunteer in literacy programs, he said. Finally he said, the business community can encourage broader public support for literacy.

"Literacy training is about people," Lacy said, "it's about jobs secondarily."

National literacy organizations are only part of the story when it comes to literacy work in the United States, Peter Waite, executive director of the national Laubach Literacy Action told conference participants.

"There's lots of informal tutoring going on," Waite said, "and it's important not to underestimate the value of smaller programs."

The Laubach method of teaching reading is one of the most popular in the world. The program takes a one-on-one approach to tutoring with a specially-created reading materials. In the 1980's there was a major shift of attention to literacy in the U.S., Waite told the group. "The national awareness campaign, the Coalition for Literacy and Project Literacy U.S. present all of us with great opportunity and great challenges," he said.

Literacy programs are expanding dramatically, and volunteer programs are having enormous growth, he said.

Waite estimates that there are more than 200,000 volunteer tutors in the U.S., serving more than 300,000 students.

In the past two and one-half years, he said, the number of students in his own organization has doubled from less than 50,000 to almost 100,000. Unfortunately, he said, resources have not doubled, and it is unlikely that the organizations are going to be able to sustain the high growth levels without additional funding.

One of the challenges faced by these volunteer organizations is capitalizing on the potential of the volunteers while avoiding the limitations they present.

As a grassroots worker who heads a national literacy coalition, John Zippert wore two hats at the National Council of Churches' Literacy Conference.

Zippert is chair of the board of the Association for Community-Based Education, a group of colleges, literacy programs and non-formal community groups that work together on issues of community development and education. He is also director of program operations for the Federation of Southern Cooperatives in Alabama.

ACBE works in specific communities among people who are concerned with their own development, Zippert said. The association was formed in the mid-70's, and works mostly in minority and mixed-ethnic communities, he said.

Zippert said ACBE considers advocacy for change with public and private groups part of its work. This includes advocacy with the churches, and also with the government, because it has greater responsibility to deal with this problem.

The groups involved with ACBE have concerns that go beyond literacy, Zippert said,the organizations really deal with questions of community development and community change. They usually come to work on literacy or popular education out of a community organizing or development process, generally for economic or political changes.

Within the past year, ACBE created a mini-grant program with a major grant it received from the MacArthur Foundation. The first cycle of mini-grants of between $3000 and $5000 went to about 25 local programs to support their local efforts. Another cycle of grants will be made this spring, Zippert said. He said that most funds received by the national association go back into local organizations.

Mollie Burney
Push Literacy Action Now, Washington, D.C.

THE LITERACY STUDENTS

MOLLIE BURNEY
Push Literacy Action Now (PLAN)

Four years ago, Mollie Burney couldn't read. She was on welfare and cleaning toilets at the Internal Revenue Service headquarters in Washington, D.C., and she wasn't happy about it. Now, a reader and a VISTA literacy worker, she says she's proud of herself and her accomplishments.

Mollie is clearly serious about literacy. She's someone who's been on both sides, and she wants to attack the problem at the roots to prevent others from facing it. So she's used her new skills to contact her Congressperson on the issue of literacy.

And she works as a parent coordinator in the "Literacy for Parenting Needs" program through Push Literacy Action Now, a Washington, D.C.-based literacy program. As a parent coordinator, she conducts workshops for young parents throughout Washington on the importance of reading for them and their children.

The mother of three surprised conference participants by stating that she's also the grandmother of three. That's one reason Mollie is so concerned about teaching young mothers the importance of reading.

VERNA GARDNER
Plantation Education Program, Inc.

In her soft, gentle Southern drawl, Verna Gardner, 38, calmly tells listeners about shoveling salt in a Louisiana mine in 110-degree heat to support her family.

The pay was good, she said, but the demands of the job made her drop out of the Plantation Education Program in New Iberia, La., where she was learning to read.

It was when she was laid off by the salt mine that she learned to read and was able to complete her General Equivalency Diploma, she said, and that put her on her way to a Licensed Practical Nurse degree.

Verna was one of seven children, all of whom dropped out of school. She said that reading wasn't valued in her home while she was growing up. Now the mother of three, she said, "What I'm doing different is I'm reading to my children." All three are avid readers, she said, and "this is because I presented books to them."

A certified Laubach tutor, Verna said that her involvement in literacy programs impressed her employer and helped her get her current job at the Consolata Nursing Home in New Iberia.

HANK GUINDON
East End Literacy

The soft-spoken Canadian was firm in his call for the churches to help get non-readers "out of the closet and teach them to read."

Hank Guindon, 50, learned to read as an adult through the East End Literacy Program in Toronto. Hank has been actively involved in the program since 1983.

Hank was one of the first adult students to write a book for adult literacy students through the New Start Reading Series of East End Literacy Press. Hank is proud of his best-selling book, "New Year's 1960," which has sold more than 2,000 copies.

Reading gives him satisfaction, he said, because now he can pick something up and read it. But he said, a problem is that he confines his reading to East End Literacy Center and doesn't read at home. Hank said he didn't learn to read because teachers were unwilling to take the time to work with him.

MERWIN HARDY
Project: LEARN

Although he was honored for excellence in production, quality and safety, retired U.S. Steel worker Merwin Hardy found his road to professional advancement blocked by his inability to read.

And when U.S. Steel closed its doors, Merwin found himself without the reading and writing skills necessary to apply for another job. Fortunately, he just qualified for early retirement under company policies.

When the high school graduate decided to join Project: LEARN in Cleveland in 1982, he admits to standing outside the building for 15 minutes before "deciding to take the leap." Now his reading skills have improved dramatically and he is confidently looking for work in the Cleveland area.

Carlos Nolasco
Project Literacy, San Francisco, California

CARLOS NOLASCO
Pacific Center for Literacy and Popular Education (Project Literacy)

When Carlos Nolasco moved to California from El Salvador in 1978, he became "immediately illiterate" although he could read in Spanish. That problem was coupled with limited job opportunities, police harassment and other prejudices he faced as a minority male.

Now the 24-year old graduate of the University of California at Santa Cruz is coordinator of Pacific Center for Literacy and Popular Education in San Francisco. Literacy, he says, "is not just reading or writing, it's becoming active in the community."

NORMAN O'DANIEL
Literacy Council of Alaska

Something about Alaska intrigued Norman O'Daniel, so he packed up his family and moved them from their Wisconsin home to Fairbanks.

Something about reading intrigued the private pilot, so he learned to read. Unlike many non-readers, Norm had high professional achievement and his lack of reading skills didn't seem to affect his career, but it did hit his self esteem. Apprenticed to a tool and die maker at a young age, Norman became a machinist, and hid his inability to read from his employers for many years. As an adult, Norm was diagnosed as severely dyslexic. He began learning to read in Wisconsin, and later became involved with the Literacy Council of Alaska at Fairbanks. He has served on the council's board of directors and as vice president. And, he said, he reads lots of books on self esteem.

RICKY PAYNE
Heart of Georgia Literacy Advance Council

It takes courage to show others a painstaking way in which some adults learn to read, but Ricky Payne was equal to the task as he patiently demonstrated a read-along reading lesson to participants in the National Council of Churches literacy conference.

Marking another year, Ricky also marked a significant turning point as, on his birthday, he spoke publicly to a group for the first time.

The quiet young Southerner was certified earlier this year as a Laubach adult reading tutor. He learned to read as an adult through the Heart of Georgia Literacy Advance Council program.

For Ricky, learning to read meant going to classes after working twelve-hour shifts at a factory where he makes hair brushes and combs.

Ricky lives with his wife and his two young children in Dodge County, Georgia.

David Smith
Literacy Action, Atlanta, Georgia

DAVID SMITH
Literacy Action, Inc.

One would think being a national tennis doubles champion and internationally renowned artist would build a man's self esteem, and of course it does, but David Smith says most of his self-esteem was built when he learned to read. David, 37, began learning to read nine years ago. Reading opened the door for professional advancement for him, he said, and his income increased by 75 percent once he learned to read.

David described the importance of the support of his community as he developed personally, and how this influenced his own outreach with other people as he progressed with reading. With wonder, the dynamic artist described learning to read as magical, like "pulling rabbits out of the hat." Something which could not have happened without caring mentors.

David now directs a program for the Department of Parks and Recreation in Atlanta. He is active in Atlanta's Literacy Action, Inc. program.

THE GRASSROOTS PROGRAMS

Each of the grassroots programs represented at the National Council of Churches' literacy conference shared certain key concerns and beliefs about literacy and the problems surrounding it, yet each group's approach to literacy differs somewhat, as do the needs of the communities they serve.

Sally McBeth
East End Literacy, Toronto, Ontario

EAST END LITERACY
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
Sally McBeth, Coordinator

The East End Literacy Program serves a large community in a crowded section of Toronto.

One in four Canadian adults are functionally illiterate, according to program directors, and there are 500,000 adults in Toronto whose literacy skills are not adequate to meet demands of everyday life.

Because these adults are unable to read street signs, make up shopping lists, or fill out job application forms, it is difficult for them to make their own decisions and function easily and independently in our society.

The program provides one-on-one tutoring, operates a reading center for students, publishes the work of its adult students through East End Literacy Press and works to increase public awareness of the issue.

LITERACY COUNCIL OF ALASKA
Fairbanks, Alaska
Riki Sipe, Director

Literacy workers in Alaska face an unusual problem: people can earn high salaries without reading skills and that can take away the incentive to learn.

At times, though, economic swings affect the employment levels and the illiterate people need to be able to learn new skills.

Alaska also has a high minority high school drop out rate and serious alcohol and drug abuse problems.

The Literacy Council of Alaska is working together with other community organizations to increase attention to the issue of illiteracy. In 1986 the council had 100 tutors working one-on-one on basic reading skills or English as a Second Language with 150 out-of-school youth and adults.

The council also operates a "Parents and Tots Reading Program" and publishes "high interest, low level reading books."

Project: LEARN
Cleveland, Ohio
Nancy Oakley, Director

In Ohio, a person must fail a written driver's license exam three times before he or she may take an oral exam. And more than 40,000 adults in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, have less than five years of formal education. That's why Project: LEARN publishes a low level study guide for the driver's license exam. And the 40,000 illiterate adults are why Project: LEARN was created in 1974 by the Interchurch Council of Greater Cleveland.

In 1986, the program provided tutoring services to 782 students in the Cleveland area. Since it was started, the program has trained 2,895 basic literacy and English as a Second Language tutors. It offers free tutoring services to anyone over the age of 16 who reads below a third grade level.

The program offers field trips to museums, musical programs and other cultural events. The participants believe this to be an important aspect of total literacy.

The program also offers a tutoring-for-class-credit program at Cleveland State University, publishes a comprehensive bibliography on books for adult new readers for libraries, and a Parent Child Preschool Book program to help prevent future illiteracy.

HEART OF GEORGIA ADVANCE LITERACY COUNCIL
Rhine, Georgia
Sister Lucy Comer, Director of Adult Literacy

It all started in 1981 with one itinerant tutor, Sister Lucy Comer. And then a board of directors was formed in a car headed toward a nutrition center in central Georgia. And now, the Heart of Georgia Advance Literacy Council provides services in five rural counties where 30-percent of the adults are functionally illiterate.

The council recruits and trains volunteer tutors, recruits and matches students with tutors, and works with libraries to meet the needs of low level readers. A tutoring program run by the council for 71 inmates at the Dodge County Correctional facility has been particularly successful.

The council also sponsored a new reader's cookbook project and a "Read-A-Toy" program with new donated toys. Adults were awarded toys to give to their children as an incentive for reading extra books.

PLAN (PUSH LITERACY ACTION NOW)
Washington, D.C.
Mike Fox, Director

Because director Mike Fox wants to teach "real life reading skills," each person who enters the reading program at PLAN leaves being able to read books of their own choice, including the classics.

PLAN has one major goal: "to help people change their lives by pushing for a realistic approach to literacy education and by working to change society's understanding of what it means to be illiterate or literate."

In contrast to the other programs represented at the National Council of Churches' literacy conference offering primarily one-on-one tutoring, PLAN generally teaches reading skills in small classes of two to six students. Individual tutoring supplements classes when necessary.

The program has helped 3000 students in 14 years. In addition to basic reading programs, it offers on-site job-related skills training and a reading program for young parents.

PLANTATION EDUCATION PROGRAM
New Iberia, Louisiana
Sister Alice Macmurdo, Coordinator

"Liberation through education" is the first step to helping people help themselves, and the guiding principle of the Plantation Education Program, Inc.

The program was started to meet the needs of poor farmworkers in southern Louisiana, the state with the highest illiteracy rate in the nation. Now the program continues its work with farmworkers, but also reaches the urban poor, the elderly, handicapped persons, people in prison and Asians and Hispanics moving into the area.

The program has developed reading materials specifically for the plantation communities it serves. It actively recruits both students and tutors, provides tutor training, and works to foster awareness about illiteracy. The program has been successful in its use of video cassettes and computers to help adults learning to read.

PACIFIC CENTER FOR LITERACY AND POPULAR EDUCATION
(PROJECT LITERACY)
San Francisco, California
Michael James, Coordinator

Popular, or critical literacy is the approach taken by the Pacific Center for Literacy and Popular Education, serving East Oakland communities near San Francisco. Working under the assumption that "illiteracy is one symptom of the larger problem of systematic inequality in our country," the program seeks to give its students the "power of the word."

The center has 20 staff coordinators, half of whom are former students, who serve the dual function of teachers and community organizers. Legal literacy and skills in community participation are pivotal in this program.

The program also develops low level reading materials of practical use to its students.

LITERACY ACTION, INC.
Atlanta, Georgia
Lewis P. Pulling, President

Students entering the Literacy Action program make a commitment to complete the program and to maintain both attendance and minimum standards. The program maintains an average enrollment of about 400 students with between 1,000 and 1,200 graduates each year. Students generally participate for a six month period.

The program started in 1968 and has remained a community-based Atlanta program. It is privately funded.

The program focuses on helping students to develop a sufficient level of literacy to learn on their own and to be able to use a library, rather than focusing on specific needs, such as filling out a job application.

It relies on a professional teaching staff assisted by about 30 volunteers. Almost all teaching takes place in small classes.

A major thrust of the program is for students to share it with other interested people.

DISCUSSION SUMMARIES

THE CHURCH'S MOTIVATION FOR WORK IN LITERACY

To consider the motivations behind the churches' involvement in literacy issues in North America, one must understand and respect the differences existing among the many U.S. and Canadian denominations. But there is common ground on which all of the denominations stand.

All of the participating denominations share the concerns of justice, love, liberation and equality. These themes are part of a common Christian heritage, and provide a clear motivation for action on the issue. Churches are challenged to respond to the overwhelming need.

WHAT SHOULD THE CHURCHES DO?

Can the different denominations also find common strategies? The group suggested that all denominations share a common ability to communicate the needs and provide exposure to literacy and the issues surrounding it.

Each church body also has the ability to identify appropriate internal structural and organizational steps it can take to combat illiteracy.

Lester Meriwether
Baptist Leadership Training Center of Texas, Fort Worth, Texas

Any church response to literacy must flow from the needs of the community. The church must first investigate the community's particular situation, then decide how it can best be of service.

The church can play many roles in the fight against illiteracy. As a service agency, it can provide tutoring, outreach, and a range of services to its community.

Ronald Cunningham
Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, Memphis, Tennessee

As an influential voice in the community, it can encourage and lead dialogues on the local level among the churches and community organizations.

As a local advocate, it can speak out on how government educational funds are used in the community.

And as a watchdog, it can investigate and monitor local institutions involved in literacy efforts.

One way the churches can become involved is to celebrate, endorse and unite on National Literacy Day, September 8.

THE CHURCH AS ADVOCATE

The church can be an advocate for the right to learn. In fact, the church has an obligation to speak in support of the literacy movement.

Churches need to become involved in advocacy for literacy funding on the local, state and national levels. In order to prevent illiteracy, the church should advocate for public education funds. The group suggested advocacy could be especially useful in obtaining funds for literacy programs for poor children in early grade levels, where the problem is acute.

The group said that schools need to be held accountable by the churches and community. At the same time, society has an obligation to treat teachers as professionals, and to recognize that to develop strong reading programs, schools may need more funds, additional facilities and reading aides.

The churches also have an opportunity to help people learn how to be advocates for themselves and for those who need help in their communities.

LITERACY AS A TWO WAY STREET

Literacy is more than a one way street, one group of conference participants suggested. Everyone involved in the issue, the churches, those who are not literate and the literate community, bears some responsibility, the group said. Literacy students who attended the conference should communicate to other students in their own communities that they, too, have the power of words.

Literacy students must communicate their strengths and needs to the church as well, and gain the churches' active cooperation on literacy issues. The church must listen to those in literacy programs who understand the soul and the essence of literacy and illiteracy.

Then, the church must also turn around and become a voice in the community for those who are not literate. At the same time, though, the church must be careful to respond honestly to the issue, and not become a channel for horror stories or gilded, romantic notions.

In its efforts to speak for the non-literate in each community, the church must also direct attention away from a "blame the victim" response. One way it can do this is to portray the lives led by those who are not literate. They have learned many creative ways of coping and often lead rich lives.

The church can also take the lead by working outside of its own congregations, perhaps by encouraging cooperative programs with

other organizations within its community.

The church also has a forum to show that it, too, is "illiterate" about some things, for example the relationship between illiteracy, economic injustice and social oppression.

Churches can also actively and aggressively support those in literacy programs.

Above all, though, the church needs to be responsible in how it addresses the problem of illiteracy. The churches don't need to add any more declarations on illiteracy and they should avoid superficial reactions to the issue. Instead, they should study carefully the implications and complexities of literacy and move the churches, people and resources in response.

MEASURING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF LITERACY PROGRAMS

Conference participants also discussed how best to measure the effectiveness of a literacy program. Depending on the needs of the evaluator, several approaches can be taken.

A statistical approach allows observers to compare pre- and post-testing results, the amount of time students spend at each level, and the overall weaker areas.

But statistics present only part of the picture, according to group members. By limiting evaluation to test scores, observers overlook the goals of the student and whether those goals have been met. These questions should be raised and answered as part of the evaluation process, the group agreed. Another measure of effectiveness is the student's attendance record, his or her retention level, and advancement in reading level.

Literacy programs can also evaluate their effectiveness in follow-up interviews with students who leave programs.

OUR NATIONAL COMMITMENT TO LITERACY

The United States' national commitment to literacy is weak, according to some participants.

The group called literacy "the survival issue of our democracy," and commented that our official leadership, our government, is not behind literacy in any strong, effective or realistic way.

The group agreed that the U.S. has become a "bottom-line culture" and that people are not interested in the depth needed to really consider issues. Evidence of this includes government funding tied to results and competition among groups for scarce resources.

Because national funding programs require proof of effectiveness, one person commented "Every literacy provider knows that results are often dishonest." Proof of progress is generally understood as grade level advancement, whereas most of the progress made by literacy students is immeasurable and to force it onto a scale is to risk the death of creativity.

Considered thought leads to our committed action. We need to revise our national priorities and revise our public education system. We need the church to lead us toward caring for our human needs as a nation.

CHURCH LEADER RESPONSES

Though conference participants were not empowered to speak for their church bodies, they can speak to them, and so the church staff representatives agreed to gather for a literacy strategizing session in New York later in 1987.

Ann Kohler
Lutheran Church Women

Several church staff members committed themselves to action within their own church circles.

Robert Walton, of the United Methodist Church, said "literacy has been given a new name for me, it's taken on a new identity: 'working for systemic change.'" Walton said possible strategies for further work on literacy issues by the denomination could include funding, advocacy and formation of effective policy.

Nanette Roberts, of the United Church of Christ, promised to continue to work with the church's public education task force to increase awareness on the issue, and use other channels of communication open to her to promote the issue.

Dorothy Headley of Church Women United said she would recommend that a literacy presentation be made at group's Common Council to increase awareness among organizational leaders. The issue of literacy, she said, is related to Church Women United's five

vear commitment to work on the root causes of poverty and women.

Harry Spigner, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, said participants must "challenge the church to respond to our definition of literacy, and to adjust its responsibilities and responses to what we think should be done."

Seminarian Nancy Mullenax, a student at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California, said she would begin making presentations on the issue within the Graduate Theological Union in the Bay area.

At the close of the consultation all church people were challenged to look into their organizations for opportunities to share their understanding of the urgency and implications of literacy in North America.

Harry Spigner
African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Muskegon, Michigan

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Conference participants considered many approaches to the problems of literacy. After listening to presentations by representatives of grassroots literacy programs, heads of national literacy projects, and governmental representatives, the conference broke into small groups to tackle the information in depth.

Much of the work of the conference was done in the small group sessions, where the church representatives and the grassroots people could share ideas and goals in a more intimate atmosphere.

Once a sense of trust was built among the small group members, they were asked to grapple with some key questions about the churches' involvement in literacy in North America and suggest some responses.

AWARENESS, ADVOCACY, ACTION

Each of the groups considering the issues seemed to agree that denominational involvement had to include elements of "awareness, advocacy and action."

Culled from the reports of each of the six small groups, the following themes were touched upon repeatedly.

Awareness. The churches can:

increase awareness of the issue within the denominations.
increase awareness of illiteracy in the community.
encourage and lead public dialogue on the issue.
provide exposure to relationship between literacy and problems of economic injustice and hunger.
increase awareness of the special gifts of non-readers.
re-direct attention from a "blame the victim" approach to consideration of societal-environmental factors.

Advocacy. The churches can advocate:
in support of funding, facilities and assistants for reading programs.
recognizing teachers as professionals.
for special literacy programs for poor children and other groups with acute literacy problems.
for public education funds at local, state and national level.
to hold school systems accountable.

Action. The churches can:

fund literacy projects and organizations.
sponsor tutoring programs.
provide active support for existing community-based literacy projects.
engage other church and community groups in joint projects.
develop basic reading materials.
monitor literacy issues and programs.
celebrate and promote National Literacy Day.

A PRAYER FOR LITERACY

We're all in this together.
Together we are engaged in a great struggle,
a struggle for literacy for all people, everywhere;
a struggle for justice, not charity.
A struggle for literacy with the Hanks and Mollies,
the Carlos' and Rickys,
the Merwins and Vernas,
the Davids and Normans of this world.
We all see parts of the struggle,
Each has glimpses of parts of solutions,
We know a lot more about the struggle than we did three days ago.
We have glimpsed more parts of solutions
than we had seen three days ago,
We have been energized, delighted, confused,
given hope, exhausted, angered, exhilarated,
Even maybe frightened by what we have seen and heard.
But we did come, we have seen, we have heard.
Now what?

Let us go and tell all what we have seen and heard,
Let us hear what the Spirit says to the churches.
Let us hear what the Spirit says through our literacy coworkers.
Let us go in peace and serve the Lord.
We're all in this together, my sisters and brothers.

Amen.

Marti Lane

APPENDIX A: Conference Program

Monday, September 14, 1987

6:00 p.m. Hospitality

6:30 p.m. Dinner

7:30 p.m. Plenary Session

Welcome to Wingspread
Henry Halsted
Vice President
The Johnson Foundation

Opening Remarks
MARTHA A. LANE
Coordinator
Volunteer Reading Aids Program
Lutheran Church Women
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Conference Overview
MARGARET L. SHAFER
Staff Associate
Education in the Society
National Council of Churches
New York, New York

East End Literacy,
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
Presenters

SALLY McBETH
Coordinator
East End Literacy
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

HANK GUINDON
Student and Volunteer
East End Literacy
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Questions and Answers

Closing Moments of Worship
DOROTHY ORTNER
Dirtector of Adult Basic Education
Intermedia/National Council of Churches
New York, New York

9:30 p.m. Adjournment

Tuesday, September 15, 1987

8:45 a.m. Plenary Session

Opening Moments of Worship
LESTER MERIWETHER
Director
Baptist Leadership Training Center of Texas
Fort Worth, Texas

Project Literacy, San Francisco, California
Presenters:

Michael James
Coordinator
Project Literacy
San Francisco, California

Carlos Nolasco
Coordinator
Project Literacy
San Francisco, California

Questions and Answers

9:45 a.m. Break

10:15 a.m. Discussion Groups

— What priority literacy issues did the presenters raise?
— How can and should churches respond to those issues

11:00 a.m. Plenary Session

Lutherans and Literacy: A Case Study
MARTHA A. LANE

Questions and Answers
National Literacy Efforts: A Panel Presentation

KARL O. HAIGLER
Director
Division of Adult Education
United States Department of Education
Washington, D.C.

DAN LACY
Vice President
Business Council for Effective Literacy
New York, New York

PETER WAITE
Executive Director
Laubach Literacy Action
Syracuse, New York

JOHN ZIPPERT
Chairman of the Board
Association for Community-Based Education
Director of Program Operations
Federation of Southern Cooperatives
Epes, Alabama

Questions and Answers

12:30 p.m. Hospitality

12:45 p.m. Luncheon

1:45 p.m. Plenary Session

Heart of Georgia Literacy Advance Council
Rhine, Georgia

Presenters:

SISTER LUCY COMER
Director of Adult Literacy
Heart of Georgia Literacy Advance Council
Eastman, Georgia

RICKY PAYNE
Student
Heart of Georgia Literacy Advance Council
Eastman, Georgia

Questions and Answers
Project: LEARN, Cleveland, Ohio

Presenters:

NANCY OAKLEY
Director
Project: LEARN
Cleveland, Ohio

Questions and Answers

3:30 p.m. Refreshments

4:00 p.m. Discussion Groups Continued

5:30 p.m. Hospitality

6:00 p.m. Dinner

7:00 p.m. Plenary Session

Plantation Education Program, Inc., New Iberia, Louisiana

Presenters:

SISTER ALICE MACMURDO
Coordinator
Plantation Education Program, Inc.
New Iberia, Louisiana

VERNA GARDNER
Tutor and Student
Plantation Education Program, Inc.
New Iberia, Louisiana

Questions and Answers
Literacy Action, Atlanta, Georgia

Presenters:

LEWIS L. PULLING
President
Literacy Action
Atlanta, Georgia

DAVID SMITH
STudent
Literacy Action
Atlanta, Georgia

Questions and Answers
Closing Moments of Worship

NANCY MULLENAX
Education Consultant
Student, Pacific School of Religion
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

9:00 p.m. Adjournment

9:30 p.m. Facilitators and Recorders Meet at Siena Center

Wednesday, September 16, 1987

8:45 p.m. Plenary Session

Opening Moments of Worship

TALATA REEVES
Director of Education
Christians for Urban Justice
Adjunct Faculty Member
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Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
Dorchester, Massachusetts

Literacy Council of Alaska, Fairbanks, Alaska

Presenters:

RIKI SIPE
Executive Director
Literacy Council of Alaska
Fairbanks, Alaska

NORMAN O'DANIEL
Student
Literacy Council of Alaska
Fairbanks, Alaska

Questions and Answers

Push Literacy Action Now, Washington, D.C.

Presenters:

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Executive Director
Push Literacy Action Now (PLAN)
Washington, D.C.

MOLLIE BURNEY
VISTA Literacy Worker/Student
Push Literacy Action Now (PLAN)
Washington, D.C.

Questions and Answers

10:15 a.m. Break

10:30 a.m. Discussion Groups

Preparation of Discussion Group Reports

11:45 a.m. Plenary Session
Discussion Group Reports
Personal Reflections of Church Representatives
Total Group Recommendations

Closing Moments of Worship
MARGARET L. SHAFER

2:00 p.m. Conference Adjournment

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This report was prepared by **Dina Morello for the NCC Design Team,** December 14, 1987.

A DEFINITION OF LITERACY

Literacy is ONE way to help people become self-determining and responsible members of their communities. Literacy can help people be all God intended them to be because literacy provides many basic skills needed to study and understand their real-life situations.

Reading and writing and math are central to literacy, but so are some other skills. The ability to see connections, to imagine different ways of doing things and different ways of living, the ability to tell of one's life in song or dance or story —this is part of becoming literate.

Literacy is to be understood within the given social, economic, political and psychological conditions in which one lives. What literacy is for one society is not literacy for another. Literacy needs to be measured and judged according to the needs of each society. Literacy needs are often different even from one community to another.

Literacy is a collective, ongoing process. It needs to have its roots in the actual situations and needs of people. Literacy needs to be based on individual needs, but also on the needs of the group of which the individual is a part. Literacy is a process by which women and men can learn to organize themselves and to help to change the things and conditions which hinder their lives and quality of life. Literacy is revolutionary when it starts with the learner's goal. That is, literacy can set people free from all kinds of oppression. Literacy brings power as well as understanding.

Literacy is a tool for education which is:

many-sided and of many kinds;
to be shared with others (not stored);
a means for gaining decision-making control over one's life;
a means for gaining decision-making power in one's community;
shaped by history and society,
but also by personal experiences and cultures;
achieved only in a just society and
which helps to bring about a just society;
strong enough to act upon forces blocking other life goals;

Literacy has to do with language—language decided by those who use it and not controlled by those in power. Literacy is creating new answers to old questions. Literacy is creating new questions which are based on how things really are. Creative literacy is learning how to learn.

Literacy has to do with promoting every person's right to learn and to have access to information. Literacy helps people to develop analytical and decision-making skills. Literacy helps people "own" information in whatever form it is carried. Literacy carries with it an obligation to advocate the same rights for others — all others.

—Design Team for "The Church's Involvement in North American Literacy."